EFFECTS EXCLUSIVE

Ask Mr. Wizard
By Mike Jittlov: MASTER OF SPEED & TIME

In a hidden valley dwells a Green Wizard, who, one morning, blasts out of his cave and runs through a forested highway at 500 mph. He transports a startled hitchhiker to Hollywood, races trains, bounds over a blockade of screaming girls and takes off in a wild roar around the world...until he slips on a banana peel and crashes down into his valley castle. Amidst the studio wreckage, he magically repairs shattered motion-picture equipment and celebrates in song (lip-sync, life-sized, stop-motion) and sparkles with dancing cameras, marching tripods, bouncing lights and hundreds of flying film cans. (The video version of this madness premiered on Walt Disney's "Major Effects" show, December 16, 1979.)

What follows is a series of questions and Jittlov's answers. And now, Mr. Wizard....

Mr. Jittlov?

Right here. *(As he leaps to the stage, and lights go on).*

Why didn't Disney get you years ago?

There're 240 million people in the U.S., and lots of buildings and trees. It's easy to hide.

But didn't you want to work at Disney?

...I've grown up alongside their creations, saw the first *Mickey Mouse Club; Darby O'Gill* was one of my favorite movies. Walt's house was a block from my high school. I probably crossed his footsteps a hundred times and never knew it. The studio itself is a special place...you can leave your car unlocked in the parking lot and never worry...it's got the friendliness of the South, and the cafeteria prices of 1968...easy-going dream factory. But I've got my *own* dreams to build and fly, and I didn't see them launching from the Disney of the 70s.

Obviously, they found you. How?

Through the Fantasyland entrance. One of my films kept getting shown over and over at the L.A. Filmex, and ABC News heard about it and decided to showcase it on their six o'clock broadcast. And a Disney producer happened to buy a TV set that day and turn it on for two minutes that night....just as *Animato* got an incredible review. Nick Bennion contacted me. He and Phil May were producing a TV special and needed a sequence to show 50 years of Mickey Mouse memorabilia—something like *Animato,* using animated photos. I said: Thank you, but I wouldn't do another kinestasis film for love or money.

What made you change your mind?

They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Do something different: do what you enjoy and make everybody look great...just film something that'll be broadcast nationwide alongside the finest animation an entire studio's created in five decades. I mean, we had several weeks. And we did it. With Deven Chierighino and Chris Barczak, I made three live-action/animation sequences about a collector who lived in a Mickey Mouse house, worked in a M.M. office and ended up in a M.M. psychiatrist's suite with a thousand M.M. toys marching out of the room—including the first stop-motion Mickey. They weren't expecting that.

PHOTOS: 1980 MIKE JITTLOV PRODUCTIONS

Above: Caught by the Green Jacket Gang! Deven Chierighino, Toni Handcock and John Massari with hapless wizard. Right: The Wizard of Speed and Time himself.

The Wizard calmly animates a seething hot 300 W. globe.

I saw that show! Who were the actors for the collector and the psychiatrist?

Me. And for the two-shots, I sat beside an animated dummy-double with my life-mask made up as the psych.

Why didn't you use another actor?

Because it was fun, and it worked perfectly, and I can brag about it. But more importantly, they saw I could do a lot more than "just animate."

How did you get to do the "Camera Wizard" sequences? Did they give you a script to follow?

Yes. Mine. They'd read one of my features and seen some film tests. When I finally came in to tell them I had to concentrate on my own projects, I saw all these cards on the storywall with "Jittlov Scene: Slow-Motion," "Speed-Motion," "Stop-Motion." And they grinned ear-to-ear, "Couldn't you make a promotional film for yourself, at the same time?"

Is that what your features will be about?

Mm, no... they're all science magic. But the *Wizard* film is a good parody. Actually, this is excellent—it's the finest film we've ever done.

Why is what we just saw... even better than what was on TV?

Wellll, they're two different animals. I produced my part of the show on film, which has a greater color and contrast range, crisper flicker and more information than video. Even though we did get a perfect film-to-video transfer at Compact, the network dropped the show through several generations to add on their commercials. Also, we've just seen the *original Wizard* film, with my original music and sound effects and editing.

But I... there was a mystical quality.

Mm hm... You just felt the first test of my features. There are wonderful things that only projected films can do. But that's secret, for now.

Is it a coincidence that your costume was the same color as your green jacket?

Innocence! That was Phil and Nick's private joke and surprise. Another was my opening character. In real life, I'm super-careful and talk a mile-a-minute off-screen. So they made my Camera Wizard entrance wildly clumsy, and mute... so they thought. Anyway, I stepped out to greet the Major, and hit a reflector, which hit a row of tripods that hit stacks of film cans and the whole set caved in as I slowly tried to save it.

Didn't you use a stunt double?

Nahhh, I go down the Colorado in kiddy wading pools, this was easy. Except that we had to do it in one take, on a studio stage. I was able to get hands-on permission to set up most of the stuff while the preparation crew stared at me.

They don't like you to help?

Oh perish forbid no. *Actors* don't know how to do *real* work. But I couldn't afford to play that game, the success of that scene was my responsibility, and the video editor's. The guys didn't know I'd made entire movies.

Why didn't you tell them?

Because industry crews don't always light up when they find out you've done their jobs and 60 others... it's not kind. You have to understand, all unions are structured on the pigeon-hole principle—one person, one talent. If your abilities and work-drive take you beyond their standardized limitations on creativity and knowledge... sometimes that means you're a rebel, and some people resent that. But there's no place or time for resentment (or *any* down feelings) during an expensive production.

Mr. Jittlov. I read your article in STARLOG #31.

Aha! *You're* the one!

(Gratuitous laughter.) **My question is: Why wasn't the rest of the show as good as your part, like you wrote?**

(Sigh.)

I mean, why'd they have to use those video effects?

Because it was a *TV* show, with a TV schedule and restrictions and budget. And these days, it costs a million dollars just for a *Mork & Mindy* hour sitcom special. This show had to be *all* effects, all dazzling brilliance, and on a much more modest budget. Video Ultimatting was touted as the answer to a dream. And everything was glowing rainbows, until..and this is what really happens in TV land....

Cone of Silence

(The next 15 minutes have been deleted to avert legal citations for industrial blasphemy. But allowable words: IATSE union strike impending, schedule moved up and locked in. Post-production matting capability problem, and eight-day shooting schedule cut to an effective two-show cannot be obvious Black Hole *promotional because promos will not be publicized by media. Previewing the movie's effects workings might give away the magic. Original plans to spotlight the true behind-the-camera stars fizz when they don't want to get in front of the camera. Network temporarily pulls show for alleged PG-rated movie being previewed in G-rated time slot—and much more.)*

End Cone

(Shockwave over audience.) ...**And that's why they had to make Joe Bottoms a superhero?**

Uh-uh-ah! Can't say "superhero," that's trademarked by DC Comics. The legal department found that out immediately. *(Groans from audience.)* After Nick dubbed his host "Major Effects," with the big M.E. on his chest, somebody suggested trademarking the word "ME" and trying some counteraction against the comic corp.

I can't stand it! Will you please tell us how in the world you ran faster than the train?!

Train was going 100 mph, I was running 200. A little humor. I actually ran several blocks beside a slow freight-line we speeded up the scene 10 times.

But it was better than Superman; it looked so real!

(Shrug.) I've been making speed-effects films for 11 years. For real speed, you should've seen Kirby Timmons and me haul out of there, before the train-yard security could catch us. One of the many benefits of independent filmmaking—lot of extracurricular exercise.

Were there any unusual problems you encountered during production?

One thousand and one, one thousand and two....Storms and power blackouts in Hollywood, color gels melting in mid-animation, freezing nights, exploding lights, a giant roach...the usual stuff. Ah, one little nightmare—the footage from a location shoot came out wildly off-speed and underexposed. Chris Barczak took apart the camera, out in the field, resoldered, checked, nothing wrong...until I discovered that the walkie-talkies we'd rented were putting out a three-foot energy field that affected the camera's circuits and the Spectra light meters. That was a new one.

How'd you run across the lake and up the mountainside?

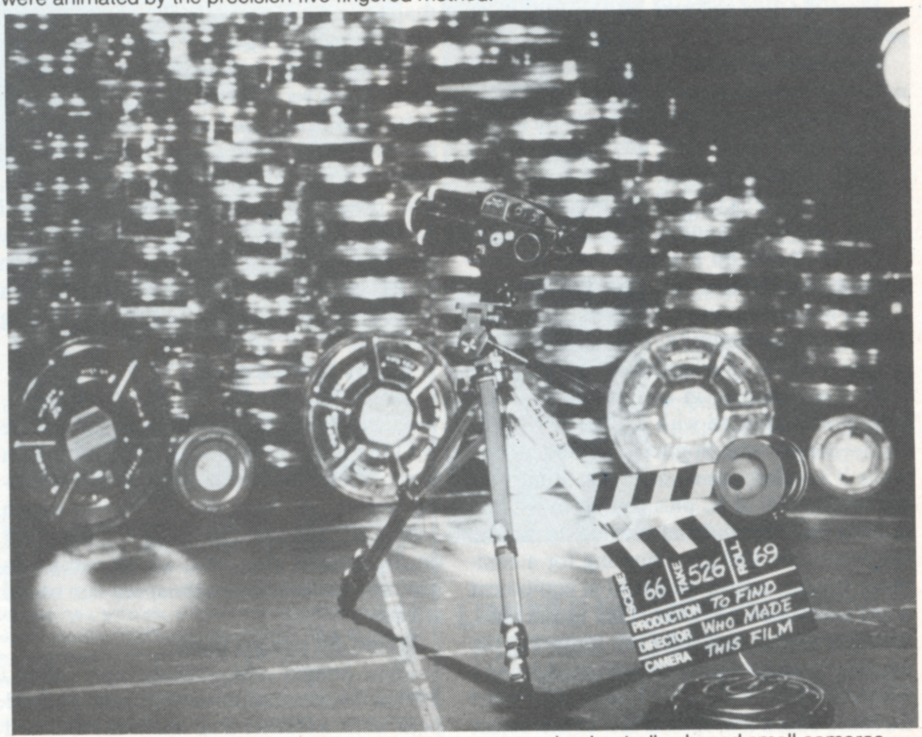
Secret! But I never got my Adidas damp.

But there was a big water spray, and waves and dust trail.

It's just clever special effects. Think about it..that's part of the fun.

I still can't figure out how you ran on the side of that building.

Dozens of heavy movie lights, tripods, stands, cans, cords and a BNC Mitchell movie camera were animated by the precision five-fingered method.



An omniverous slatebord (with many interesting messages) animatedly chased small cameras and tripods around the sets.

The Wizard on the run. "For the 21 stop-motion scenes involving the Wizard, I had to move my expression and body incredibly slowly—about one screen second to the hour!"

There are two dozen Hollywood tourists who still can't figure out why this madman in a green robe was jumping high up on this wall, 40 times. Deven stop-framed me, excellent reflexes.

Who was the actress who played the hitchhiker? Did you really carry her?

Yes, and she's a bundle of joy. Toni Handcock's an excellent example of multi-talent . . . she did perfect slow-motion acting, drove some of the camera vehichles and helped animate the final scene with the film-can waterfalls.

How did you animate all the tripods so smoothly?

With Glymer 10-2 servos co-axed to a micro-bit computer with floppy-disc over-riders. (I'm kidding.) I went over to them and *moved* them . . . by hand, five fingers.

But it looks so perfect.

You do it perfectly, it looks perfect. Takes a little time and planning, but that's all.

Couldn't you do it simpler with motion-control, like Dykstra and Trumbull use?

Ah, but can John or Doug act and sing? The big rigs are beautiful, but you don't have to rent a Mack 18-wheeler to take a Honda load. For example, in one of the scenes, I stop-motion danced with a giant BNC Mitchell—the camera bounced up and down, while it nodded side-to-side, leaned into the dance and out of it, plus moved in a curve around me. We *could* have wired up motors for every axis, and gone hunting for a computer system, couple thousand in equipment and rentals and transport, plus technicians, weeks of effort. Instead, I did it the way the ancient cavemen must have animated, using a Moviola dolly with a hydraulic lift, some threaded shims and several sets of increment tapes. Six hours to stage and light, and two hours to film it four ways. Each way was perfect. Just use as much technology as you really need.

Was that really you singing?

(Ahem.) IIII am the Wizard offf Speed and Tiiiime.!

Where did you find the music? What was the record?

We needed a strong score, rollicking, to do all the stop-motion to. Phil and Nick said to just make the visuals, the entire show would be post-scored. But you don't do *Chorus Line* by telling 'em, "Okay, people, *dance*! We'll add the music in later." It doesn't work that way. They said: Don't worry. So that night I walked up the mount beyond the Observatory, and whistled up a melody I could hear over and over. And John Massari (who also acted, and drove and animated) listened to my tape, then orchestrated and conducted an unbelieveable overdub session, and played several synthesizers. When I screened the film for Phil and Nick, they almost fell off their seats. We had our own perfect score, locked into the visuals by a Wizard singing everything to life. And I sang well.

Wasn't it different on TV?

You have an astute auditory memory.... Wonderful as the music was, it had been done in a little studio next to a take-out deli in Van Nuys. Not an "industrially approved" recording session. Al Stern did his best to match John's art; and I had to resing it at Compact on the transfer day, with all the executives staring. Similar story on the speed-run sound effects.

Where did you get those?

(He brings the microphone close.) shhhhhffwooooooomm*wah*-BLAMMMM!! *(wait until windows stop shaking.)* Bussard ramjet.

How'd you make your eyes go different directions?

How'd you get stop-motion with blurs?

How'd you do the sparkles?

While we are on the subject of extraordinary talent and humble self-sacrificing genius, could someone please ask, who filmed me while I was in the scene?

(Hushed silence.)

Who made all the lights follow the Wizard, and the film cans fly and cameras spin? It wasn't done by telekinesis.

Who filmed you when you were in the scene?

I'm glad you asked that! The answer is Deven Chierighino.

But didn't you just animate everything, and matte yourself in, somehow, in live-action?

They asked for stop-motion, I gave them stop-motion *breakthroughs*. When the Wizard explodes out from under the equipment rubble, *everything* from there on is stop-motion. And for the 21 scenes involving the Wizard, I had to move my expression and body incredibly slowly, at about one screen-second to the hour, and make it look natural—814 frames of stop-motion singing. Deven had to move everything *around* me, as well as pan, tilt, dolly, crane, zoom and focus the taking camera. In some scenes I swept my arms as Deven took a slow-shutter frame, and the consecutive overlapping blurs gave a surreal fanning effect.

How much did Deven actually animate?

Oh, about 30 percent, and 30 percent is 6,244 objects precisely positioned. Toni animated 656. I did the rest, including 951 rotoscope sparkle burn-in scenes, for a total of 21,111 animation moves, not counting retakes and tests. That's just the animation.

(Rolling gasps.)

Ahaaa, you're starting to realize. I always make these films sound so easy. But think—you've go two and a half months to make a story, write a script, storyboard it, compose and produce and sing the music, invent sound effects, breakdown the magtracks and graph the animation, find the locations, and the crew, and the equipment, then build the props, the scenes, light, direct, film, act, edit, and accomplish more effects and animation than there are in entire feature films. What would you do? And how?

What we created, is commercial-perfect, with extremely rich visuals, high-energy moves and editing, exceptional production values on a par with mammoth agency commercials costing $200,000 per minute ... done by a few good friends. And a lot of love.

How much did they pay you? ★

(To be concluded)

FILM COLLECTORS: See Classified for special offer—16mm prints of "The Wizard of Speed and Time" available exclusively to STARLOG readers from Mike Jittlov.